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Kidnaped by North Korea's Premier Film Buff

South Korean Couple Says Leader's Heir Apparent Wanted Their Talent

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A South Korean film director and actress who disappeared in Hong Kong in 1978 said yesterday that they had been kidnaped to North Korea and held for eight years on the personal orders of Kim Chong Il, the North Korean heir apparent and apparently a devoted movie buff.

Director Shin Sang Ok, 59, and his actress wife, Choi En Hui, 55, escaped from North Korean custody on March 13 and took refuge in the U.S. Embassy while visiting Vienna, Austria. They told their story—as full of drama and intrigue as a movie thriller—for the first time yesterday to two reporters in a Baltimore hotel while under U.S. government protection.

The couple, who have applied for permanent residence in the United States, depicted the 45-year-old Kim Chong Il as the “micro-manager” of all decisions in North Korea today. They said his 74-year-old father, Kim Il Sung, is an ailing figurehead who is told of many decisions after the fact, including the decision to kidnap the two South Koreans in an effort to improve the North Korean motion picture industry.

The younger Kim is “very bright” and a hard worker, Shin said, but “due to his background and upbringing” lacks a sense of humanity or feeling of guilt about misdeeds. The heir apparent, who has never been interviewed by outsiders and is largely unknown to Western observers, was described as a short, chubby man who has “a love affair with motion pictures” and a private collection of 20,000 films from Hollywood and other film-making capitals.

Shin and Choi declined to say when or how they came to the United States, but said they have been here for more than a month. U.S. officials said they have been questioned extensively by the Central Intelligence Agency because of their rare first hand knowledge of North Korea's ruling circles.

The disappearance of Shin and Choi eight years ago, their reappearance in North Korean custody nearly six years later and their escape to the West two months ago in Vienna have all been sensational stories in Asia, especially in South Korea.

Shin, who made nearly 100 films in South Korea and seven films while working for North Korea, has won many top Asian film

awards and is considered the leading Korean director. Choi, who was compared to Elizabeth Taylor in beauty and popularity in her younger days, also won many prizes on both sides of the 38th parallel, and last year was named best actress at the Moscow Film Festival for a North Korean production called “Salt.” The couple, who had been married and divorced before the kidnappings, said they now consider themselves man and wife once more.

The ordeal of the movie-making couple, as they told it yesterday, included almost four years' imprisonment for Shin in a North Korean prison after he tried to escape, while Choi was held under house arrest for a similar period. Shin said about 2,000 “political prisoners” were being held in “Prison Number Six,” an hour from Pyongyang during the time of his incarceration. He said he was told that anyone caught criticizing Kim Il Sung or Communist Party policy was sentenced to at least 20 years in prison without trial.

In North Korea, which is remarkably isolated, Kim Il Sung is “idealized as a deity,” Choi said. People over 40 probably don't really believe all they are told but “of those who are younger, 70 percent or maybe all, truly believe,” she added.

After their release from prison and house arrest, the couple said they lived in luxury as “state guests” in a heavily guarded compound formerly occupied by Kim Chong Il, with luxurious rooms and a private motion picture theater. But the average North Korean lives in bleak conditions, they said.

Shin said that because the Pyongyang leaders are “people without common sense,” there is a persistent danger of rash action by the North Koreans. Because of this attitude and the massive armed forces of the North—nearly 900,000 troops, by U.S. estimate—the possibility of war against the South is serious, he added.

The couple's bizarre odyssey began when Choi disappeared in Hong Kong in January 1978. She said yesterday that she had been lured there by an offer of a lucrative motion picture contract and was kidnaped at Repulse Bay on the southern side of the island to the first of a series of boats which took her, faint and sobbing, to the North Korean port of Nampo near Pyongyang.

Choi said she was met at the dock by Kim Chong Il, who welcomed her and had her placed in VIP quarters.

Shin disappeared seven months later, in July 1978, in Hong Kong after unsuccessfully mounting a search for Choi. He told a similar story of being lured to Repulse Bay, bound and partly anesthetized and taken by boats to North Korea.

There was no news of Choi, he said, and at the end of 1978 he escaped from his VIP residence but was caught. Four months later he escaped and was caught again, and this time placed in Prison Number Six, Shin said. In the meantime, the actress had been taken to a several small houses in the countryside for indoctrination during regular visits by a party official, she said.

The couple said that until they were reunited on March 6, 1983, at a banquet given for them by Kim Chong Il at communist party headquarters in Pyongyang, neither was sure the other was alive or in North Korea.

When the younger Kim asked Shin to be his special adviser on motion pictures, the director said, he decided to play along in order to find a way out. His wife said much the same thing, adding that they played their greatest roles to convince North Koreans of their reliability.

Shin said the younger Kim asked him to forgive the recent difficulties and admitted that he had planned the kidnappings. Kim was enthusiastic about creating a major motion picture industry in Pyongyang and built a new studio there at great expense, Shin said.



Choi and Shin in Moscow's Red Square in 1985.

The couple said they traveled to Eastern Europe on film-making missions and occasionally to film festivals in West Germany and London since their 1983 reunion, but that they never were together in a situation where escape was possible until the visit to Vienna two months ago.

Shin and Choi said they made it to the U.S. Embassy with the assistance of a Japanese journalist. They said were lightly guarded at the time because of the increasing trust by Pyongyang authorities.

As recently as a week ago, they received "indirect information" from Pyongyang that if they live in neither the United States nor South Korea "we can have anything we want," said Shin.

The film-maker said he will not accept the offer.

The South Korean government, which is anxious for Shin and Choi to return, issued a statement last



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Shin and Choi told "many times" that trying to defect would mean death.

Sunday praising their "courageous" escape and saying their artistic and personal freedom will be guaranteed "without questioning past behavior" if they come home.

The couple yesterday said that they plan to visit South Korea sometime, but hope to live in the United States. A State Department spokesman said last night that the couple will be allowed to remain in this country "indefinitely" but that their final immigration status has not been determined. Shin said they were told "many times" in North Korea they would be killed if they defected, and expressed concern that North Korea will take their public statements as a "declaration of war" meriting assassination.

Shin said he and Choi sought the

interview with two U.S. journalists because if they remained silent, North Korean "disinformation" or "counter-propaganda" would misrepresent their story and embarrass the United States.

The North Korean Ministry of Culture charged March 21 that Shin had misappropriated \$2.3 million in North Korean funds which had been placed in a Bank of America account in Vienna for his use in movie-making, and that this was the true motive for his "embrace of the United States." Shin said he has control of the account but has not dipped into it or decided whether to keep the money.

Staff researcher Jaehoon Ahn contributed to this report.